

# THE PROCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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## Zusammenfassung

Die Ergebnisse beim Erlernen einer neuen Zielsprache werden nach wie vor nach Unterrichtsgrundlagen des Behaviorismus aus den 50er Jahren gemessen. Danach orientiert sich der Sprachansatz des Lerners auf eine ungenaue Wiedergabe, seine Fehler werden durch ungenügende Praxis erklärt. Der behavioristische Ansatz erwies sich in neueren Theorien als zu ungenau. Seitdem haben Forschungen ergeben, dass das Erlernen einer zweiten Sprache von qualitativen Veränderungen und von Rückschritten bestimmt wird. Das Erlernen einer weiteren Sprache wird durch verschiedene unterschiedliche Faktoren bestimmt, von denen der formale Sprachunterricht nur einer ist. Die L 2-Entwicklung des Lerners ist von der mentalen Informationsverarbeitung, von der kognitiven Reife, früheren sprachlichen Erfahrungen, zeitlichen Beschränkungen, individuellen psychologischen Eigenschaften sowie dem sozialen Umfeld abhängig. Hier werden Modelle und Lehrmethoden mit Fokus auf die Sprache des Lerners vorgestellt. Die hier genannten Fakten dienen dem besseren Verständnis eines andauernden Lernprozesses und können für die Interpretation von Unterrichtsergebnissen herangezogen werden.

## Abstract

The progress of learners in the acquisition of a new language (L2) is often measured by standards set for teaching in the 1950's by behaviourism. According to this view, the learner's language is considered to be an incorrect version of the target language and mistakes are explained in terms of lack of practice. This approach was proved inaccurate by later language acquisition theories and research. Now it has been shown that the process of L2 development is characterized by both positive changes and regressions. L2 develops under the influence of many factors with formal instruction being only one of them. The L2 development depends on how the brain processes information, the cognitive maturity of the learner, previous linguistic experience, time limitations, the individual's psychological characteristics and the social circumstances of learning. This paper examines three models of second language acquisition and teaching methods based on these models, with a specific focus on the characteristics of the learners' developing speech. The facts in the article provide a better understanding of the ongoing learning process and can be used for the interpretation of classroom results.

## » I. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching is a crucial component of the internationalization policy implemented at the UAS Wildau. Language teachers are provided with the Common European Framework of References for Languages to assess the learners' level of achievement at the end of the teaching period. But it is important for all educators who teach students using non-native languages to know how language learning takes place, what is realistic to expect of learners during the teaching process and whether what we practice in the classroom is consistent with how languages are learned.

The purpose of this paper is to characterize the process of language development in order to enable teachers to set reasonable goals in the classroom, adjust their teaching practices for the learner's needs and realistically assess their progress. The paper aims to examine a few influential

teaching methods, their theoretical background and their effectiveness in light of research findings in second language acquisition and classroom reality.

Theoretical models describing how children acquire their first language have served as a framework for studies of how second language is learned. The conclusions of researchers about second language acquisition might be better comprehended in light of the parallel first language acquisition theory. For this reason we begin by considering first language acquisition theories. Next we will examine second language acquisition theories and the effects of their implementation in teaching. Finally we will present some conclusions about second language acquisition which might provide guidelines for the evaluation of learning, goal setting and the choosing of teaching methods that serve the interests of learners in certain unique circumstances.

## » II. FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES

Before looking at first and second language acquisition processes it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the terms first language, second language and foreign language. According to Crystal (2007: 427), 'first language' (L1) refers to the language which is first acquired by a child. The term 'second language' (L2) is generally used for any language acquired by a learner other than the first language. In certain situations a distinction is made between second and foreign language. As Rod Ellis (2008b: 6-7) suggests, second language plays an institutional and social role in the community, whereas "foreign language learning takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in the community and is primarily used only in classroom". In this paper both foreign and second language learning are referred to as second language acquisition since our interest is to

consider underlying psycholinguistic mechanisms which are believed to be the same for both processes.

One of the influential theories in the 1950s and early 1960s describing first language acquisition is behaviourism. Behaviorists (Skinner 1957) view language learning as they do the learning of any set of new habits. Thus, imitation of what children hear in their environment, practice and negative or positive reinforcement from caregivers are the primary processes in the language development. Studies of L1 learning showed that in fact imitation and practice take place when a child learns language but do not exclusively account for the process. The question, which behaviourism could not answer was why children make 'creative' mistakes, like *Mummy goed*, if they only imitate language in their environment.

Noam Chomsky (1959), the founder of generative grammar, pointed out that language used by children is not mere repetition, as behaviourists suggested. Rather it is creative, because children produce sentences that they have never learned before, and rule-governed, even if the rules applied by children differ from those used by grown-ups. Chomsky's next claim was that a complex and abstract grammar could not be learned in such a limited time frame from often qualitatively poor samples of language that children encounter in their environment. He concluded that children have an innate facility, which helps them to learn the grammar by discovering the rules from language they hear. In other words, the ability to acquire language rules is genetically hardwired.

Chomskian ideas encouraged a lot of studies of children's speech with findings which seemed to support his claims of the innate nature of language acquisition since they all showed almost identical patterns of children's speech development and internal predisposition. Eimas et al. (1971) discovered that babies under the age of six months can distinguish phonemes (sounds) used in other languages they have not encountered before and concluded that children are born sensitive to language sounds. Slobin (1970)

revealed similarities in language learning behaviour of young children. All of them go through the same developmental phases as crying, cooing, babbling, etc. Brown (1973) came up with a relatively fixed order in which children learn grammatical morphemes in English (plural *-s*, articles *the* and *a*, regular past *-ed*). Children go through similar developmental stages of learning negations (Wode 1981) and questions (Bloom 1991) in English and other languages.

Developmental and cognitive psychologists seriously questioned the view of first language development as a genetically determined process. Ellis (1993: 42-43) pointed out that Chomskian theory did not provide the explanation of how the "mental organ" (the Chomskian term for innate ability) learned grammar rules and suggested a "simpler" account of the process. Developmentalists claimed that children's ability to make associations between things that occur together and general learning mechanisms, like analysis and categorization, are the internal factors necessary for learning a language. They emphasize the importance of the environment in which children are exposed to many thousands of opportunities to learn words and phrases. The utterances learned throughout the child's usage history are analyzed and regularities of use are abstracted to represent grammar rules (Ellis 2008a). The features of language which children encounter more frequently are acquired earlier.

### » III. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

If, according to behaviourists, children learn their first language by imitating what they hear, the situation would be more complicated when it comes to learning the second language since a set of responses already exists in the first language. The process of second language teaching was about setting new habits in response to stimuli in a habitual environment. The first language was believed to help learning if the structures in the native language and in the target language were similar. If the structures in the two languages differed,

then learning the new target language would be difficult. It was suggested a teacher should make sure that students were developing a new habit by means of imitation and repetition of the same structures of the target language over and over again. Moreover a teacher was supposed to focus on teaching structures which were believed to be difficult, i.e. structures differing in the target and native languages. Linguists practicing the strategy of Contrastive Analysis, focused on comparing languages, revealing differences between them and providing clues for successful teaching.

However, practical experience showed that the difficulties the learners had with L2 were not always predicted by Contrastive Analysis. The researchers changed their focus to the analysis of learners' speech, revealing that their language is systematic i.e. it obeys certain rules, which are not necessarily similar to target-language rules. Errors could be partially explained by regularities found in the language they learn. An interlanguage is formed that has characteristics of previously learned languages as well as characteristics of L2. Studies of how L2 learners acquire grammatical morphemes, negation, questions, reference to the past (Lightbown and Spada 2006) showed that language learners with different language backgrounds go through similar developmental stages in acquiring these linguistic features and the stages resemble those which children learning their L1 go through.

The significant difference between the L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition process is that the developmental stages of L2 learners are not strictly separated from each other. An L2 learner may concurrently use sentences characteristic of different developmental stages. Advanced L2 learners when under stress or in complex communicative situations may use language of earlier stages. A child achieves a perfect mastery of the native language but perfect mastery is not likely to happen in L2 acquisition since at some point of development some features in the learner's interlanguage stop changing. This phenomenon is referred to as fossilization. Another crucial factor in the L2 learning process is the influence of L1. If learners feel similarities between their native and target languages

they transfer rules from their L1 to their L2. L1 influence prevents learners from seeing that the utterance they make is not based on the L2 features (White 1991). Sometimes the learners know the L2 rule but do not apply it because it is perceived as awkward due to the influence of their L1 (Schachter 1974).

The similarities revealed in L1 and L2 acquisition processes encouraged many researchers to use the Chomskian model of L1 acquisition as a model for L2 acquisition. One of the most influential theories based on this model was developed by Steven Krashen (1985). Its underlying principles shaped the communicative approach in language teaching. There are five main hypotheses in the theory. First of all, Krashen makes a distinction between the process of language acquisition and language learning:

*“Acquisition is a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language, while learning is a conscious process that results in ‘knowing about language’”* (Krashen 1985:1).

Krashen suggests that learning does not lead to acquisition. Secondly, acquisition of language rules takes place according to a predictable sequence, independent of classroom instructions and formal simplicity. Thirdly, rules, which the student learns can only be used to correct the written or spoken output but do not lead to language acquisition.

The fourth hypothesis of Krashen provides three important components in this process of acquisition: the comprehensible input, the internal language processor (Chomsky’s Language Acquisition Device, LAD) and the affective filter. The comprehensible input is the message that a learner understands. The LAD “generates possible rules according to innate procedures” (Krashen 1985: 2f.). Another important factor in the process of language acquisition is the affective filter, which defines how much of the comprehended input reaches the LAD.

Fifthly, Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis claims, that the comprehensible input reaches LAD if the acquirer is ‘open’ to the input. Krashen explains what the affective filter is and names situations in

which it might be up and down: *“[It is up] when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious, when he is ‘on the defensive’, when he considers the language class to be a place where his weaknesses will be revealed. The filter is down when the acquirer is not concerned with the possibility of failure in language acquisition and when he considers himself to be a potential member of the group speaking the target language”* (Krashen 1985: 3f.).

As we have seen, Krashen suggests that L1 and L2 language learners use the same mechanisms for acquiring languages and that the ‘affective filter’ accounts for the degree of success that second language learners achieve. Furthermore, students’ efforts to learn rules of the target language do not result in acquiring proficiency. What learners benefit from most is comprehensible input. Apart from providing comprehensible input there is hardly anything a teacher can do since there is a certain order of language acquisition of universal nature, found in learners in different environments and with different first language backgrounds.

Krashen’s theory initiated a number of studies focusing on the effect of comprehensible input in the form of reading and listening. Exposure to written and audio texts proved to be positive for the development of learners’ vocabulary and speaking particularly at earlier stages of language learning (Lightbown 2002, cited in Lightbown and Spada 2006: 145). However, in the long run groups receiving traditional instructions showed better writing skills. According to Trahey and White (1993) learners could acquire new language features from language they understood but the input did not help them to correct mistakes they made. Groups receiving corrective feedback from teachers showed better results. Furthermore, learners who received a lot of input, explicit instructions and tasks focused on targeted linguistic features showed better results than learners exposed to texts only (Spada, Lightbown and White 2005, cited in Lightbown and Spada 2006: 148). So, comprehensible input is far more beneficial for learners if it is offered with form-focused instructions and negative evidence.

The role of the affective filter in the L2 acquisition process was analyzed and found insufficient. Schumann’s study of Alberto (1978), a thirty-three year-old Costa Rican, who kept social and psychological distance from native speakers, revealed the same patterns of linguistic development as found in Schmidt’s study of Wes (1983), a thirty-three year-old Japanese, who seemed to enjoy regular contacts with native speakers of English. Thus affective filter cannot fully account for differences between individuals in terms of success in language learning. However there are several psychological features underlying second language acquisition which are believed to explain why some learners succeed more than others. Researchers present different sets of characteristics necessary for successful learning. Cook (1996) mentions such factors as motivation, aptitude, learning strategies, age, cognitive style and personality. This list can be extended with anxiety, willingness to communicate and learner beliefs about the effectiveness of teaching instructions (Ellis 2008b). Identity and ethnic group affiliation are some social factors also affecting language learning process (Lightbown and Spada 2006).

So far we have considered L2 acquisition models based on habit formation and the internal language processor or LAD. The latest acquisition model is suggested by cognitive and developmental psychologists who explain both L1 and L2 acquisition processes in terms of the same cognitive learning mechanisms, i.e. associative learning, analysis and categorization. Just like children, L2 learners store multi-word units in their memory and extract regularities from them (Ellis 2008a). For learners to acquire multi-word units, they should encounter them many times in meaningful communication. The main teaching principle that can be drawn from this acquisition model is to teach phrases or lexico-grammatical units, rather than words and rules of grammar in isolation. Presenting lexico-grammatical units and analyzing them would supposedly contribute to grammar acquisition (Lewis 1983, Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992).

This model of L2 acquisition is based on the L1 acquisition model and on the principle that as soon as L2 learners create their database of multi-word

units, like children learning L1, they should implicitly extract grammar regularities and also, like native-speakers, pull out ready-made phrases and sentences from their memory and produce native-like utterances fluently. The question is whether L2 learners have the time and necessary input to accumulate all these multi-word units. Researchers present interesting facts which help answer the question. McLaughlin writes:

*“Consider the time it takes for a child to learn a first language: assuming that young children are exposed to a normal linguistic environment for at least five hours a day, they will have had, conservatively, 9,000 hours of exposure between the ages of one and six years. In contrast, the Army Language School in California regarded 1,300 hours as sufficient for an English-speaking adult to attain near-native competence in Vietnamese”* (McLaughlin 1993: 46).

Native speaker memory may store up to 100,000 phrases. Swan (2006) notices that if a learner memorizes ten phrases a day, it might take him/her thirty years to achieve native-like command. Ellis et al. (2008) revealed significant differences between the accuracy and fluency of processing academic formulas shown by native and non-native speaker students at the University of Michigan. They explained the differences in terms of frequency of exposure and practice. They wrote that over ten years native speakers encountered the academic language input at a rate of 30,000 words per day and output of 7,500 words per day. This makes 109 million words of input and 27 million words of output with the possibility to encounter academic formulas between 1,188 and 4,572 times. As for non-native speakers in this experiment, they learned English for twelve months with the intake of 10,000 words per day which amounts to 3.7 million words of total intake over the whole period. Ellis et al. conclude that the possibility is very high that non-native speakers did not experience some of the formulas at all.

Apart from the amount of practice and frequency of exposure to language which is available to native and non-native speakers, different social conditions and the cognitive maturity of L2

learners also make the two processes quite different. Whereas children have to engage in verbal communication and use language to satisfy their needs, adult L2 learners may have other problem-solving strategies, which allow them to omit practicing language (Wray 2002). Because adults already know where to look for dependable clues, they rely on the context of communication and content words (nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives) to figure out or convey the meaning, and overlook or underuse grammatical morphemes, which are often redundant for expressing the meaning (Ellis 2008b). Unlike children, who have a chance to receive a lot of input before they start speaking, adult learners have to start using L2 before they know enough of it. Obviously adults rely on their previous linguistic knowledge to figure out a new language (Wray 2002). At this point the teacher's form-focused instructions and corrective feedback are important to draw the learners' attention to the linguistic features that are not salient and to minimize the influence of the learners' L1 (Ellis 2008b).

#### » IV. CONCLUSION

We have considered three main models of second language acquisition along with teaching principles and methods based on these models. Our goal was to identify the characteristics of the second language acquisition process and to specify the optimal context of application and limitations of teaching methods designed to facilitate the acquisition process.

It turned out to be mistaken to expect that forming the right kind of new linguistic habits by drilling grammar structures would bring learners to produce the right version of the target language and to explain learners' errors exclusively as a result of insufficient exercises. As studies of the L2 acquisition process show, it is inaccurate to view the emerging learners' language as an incorrect form of the target language. Errors which learners make might be better explained in terms of their developing knowledge of the second language. The correct utterances which they produce might sometimes be the result of rote

memorization and not actual linguistic ability. Furthermore, apparent errors such as the form *wented* in *I wented to the shop* could be a feature of a higher developmental stage in which the learners have acquired the rule of forming regular past simple tense.

Absolute mastery of the target language would probably be an unrealistic and unnecessary goal for L2 learners in many educational contexts. The social circumstances and conditions of L2 acquisition considerably differ from those of children learning their first language. L2 learners do not have the time that children have to experience the language and have to begin using the target language before they have gained enough knowledge about it. L2 learners already have a firmly entrenched native language and often rely on its norms to deal with a new language. Older learners can understand the meaning of the utterance relying on the situational clues and a few key words so they overlook grammatical morphemes which are often low in salience and redundant in the understanding of meaning; therefore when speaking about past events the learners initially rely on the adverb *yesterday* and ignore the morpheme *-ed*.

Form-focused instructions are essential in the classroom to help learners see features of the target language which they might otherwise overlook. However, L2 learners do not learn the language by gradually acquiring one linguistic feature after the other. This is one of the reasons why the Audio-Lingual Method proved unsuccessful. Language progress is better explained in terms of qualitative changes when a breakthrough occurs in the learner's language even without a teacher's obvious influence. Corrective feedback is also necessary to help learners see when they apply the rules they learned incorrectly. Formal instructions and correction integrated into communicative and task-based methods contribute together towards better results.

L2 acquisition process involves psychological and social factors which might constrain the learner's achievements in acquiring the second language. Among the most important of these factors are



memory, age, learning strategies, motivation, personality, willingness to communicate and the learner's beliefs about effective teaching strategies.

With so many psychological aspects involved in the language acquisition process and with the variety of specific needs of learners in different educational contexts, a teacher may decide to choose effective techniques based on actual classroom research which could show if there is a relationship between a desired outcome and a method or technique used in the classroom. The characteristics of the L2 acquisition process might be useful for goal-setting, evaluating the process of learning and classroom research results.

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